

Why Horses? Experiencing Equine Experiential Learning

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You know how a good book sticks with you long after you've finished it? Or the way a particular piece of music or a good movie continued to touch you, and replay in your mind, long after experiencing it? That is how it feels after participating in an Equine Experiential Learning session. It sticks with you because it is an *experience*.

When you're reading a book, listening to music, watching a movie, the more "in to it" you are, the more you are experiencing it emotionally (you may cry,), mentally (you're thinking along with the characters), and physically (you might jump at a startling moment, tense-up, laugh, or again, cry). You respond to the action in the book, music or movie. You are right there "in" the book, "in" the music, "in" the movie. You start to experience it as though you are right there in it, right in the moment, experiencing the whole experience. Who hasn't felt as though they were learning to ride a broom along with Harry Potter, riding Secretariat, Sea Biscuit or the Black Stallion, feeling energized and bold when hearing the opening theme to "Star Wars," tense, listening to Vivaldi's "Winter"?

Those thoughts, feelings and physical sensations get stored in your somatic (body) memory as well as in your mind. So addressing any issue in a somatic manner is terrifically effective, because the whole memory is accessed, the whole experience. And it becomes a little harder for your mind to play any tricks on you. You access honesty in somatic work. The mind will say, "No, no, please don't make me look at that," or "No, you can't make me deal with that. Here, let's deal with this bit of surface trivia, instead." The body's stored information gets around all that to the direct experience of what really happened, and what is really happening in the moment. You may have *had* a trauma in the past, but in the moment, the now, that trauma doesn't exist. Coming into the moment helps to release the trauma.

So why *horses*? In Equine Experiential Learning, also know variously as Facilitated Experiential Equine Learning, Experiential Equine Learning, and by many other names, the horse is the partner in the process. This work is not to be confused with EAGALA games, therapeutic riding for physically challenged individuals, or therapy. Sara Sherman of Discovery Horse presented the workshop I attended at Spirit Horse Center in Brainerd, MN. Sherman, who is training with Melisa Pearce of Touched By A Horse, utilizes elements of Pearce's Equine Gestalt Coaching™ Method. Pearce is a psychotherapist, personal coach, and horsewoman, who has developed the Equine Gestalt Coaching™ Method. [See below for resources.] Gestalt is a process based on the idea of a synthesis of thoughts, emotions, and experience, a wholeness of experience. In Equine Gestalt Coaching™ Method, the horse is considered a full partner, a fully aware, sentient being who participates voluntarily in the work at hand. The horse is not considered a tool or a mirror in this work. The human facilitator is a coach in the process, reading the horse's cues and responses, which help to pinpoint areas of stuckness, where we're not in the moment. In the moment is where healing happens, in the now. Horses help to bring us into the moment, or show us where we are not present, stuck in the past.

Horses are extremely sensitive, aware, sentient beings. They live in the now, in the moment, are present. Horses are prey animals; they need to be able to sense what is going on around them right now: emotionally, mentally, physically. Failing to sense quickly what is going on around them may mean life or death for a horse in the wild. Horses are known for their reactivity, their ability to respond quickly to a situation. So when a human comes into close proximity to a horse, a horse pays attention. They are aware of our feelings, often more so than we are, since we often try to cloak our feelings in mental gymnastics and denials. But the horses pay attention and are aware of what we are experiencing at the moment.

Horses have highly refined radar and b.s. detectors: You might say you love your horse, and indeed you do, but at the moment, you are mad and frustrated (for whatever reason), and your horse knows it, feels, and responds accordingly—usually by moving away, feeling threatened by your aggressive emotions and lack of present-ness. Mentally you're not upset with your horse at all, but emotionally you are upset about something that may have happened earlier in the day. You are not present except in your body, because you are busy reliving that upset. Try going for a ride when you are upset about some issue in your life, and then try going for a ride when you are present and in the moment with your horse. The difference will amaze you, and the ride will be safer for both of you. And please not, we humans do have the capability to consciously and deliberately shift gears and to think, act, and feel differently, to bring ourselves back into the moment. Horses just help to point this out for us; that's their gift to us.

Often when we feel out of control in our lives, or in a certain area(s) of our life, we try to be more controlling toward what we think should be controllable, like our horses, dogs, partners, family, children, etc. The horse senses how we try to transfer those feelings on to him or her, and responds, bringing us back into the moment: "Hey, you're frightening me. I'm not comfortable around you when you are angry/frustrated about (fill in the blank), so I'm going to move over here until you calm down and stop acting like a predator toward me." Horses help us to realize that we need to be responsible for our emotions and our thoughts.

Horses also help to bring us back into the moment. Maybe mentally you are off flying a broom with Harry Potter, or reliving being chewed-out by your boss, or upset with your boyfriend/girlfriend/spouse and thinking about the "talk" you need to have. Your horse senses your "absence" from the moment, because really, you aren't there; your body is, but you aren't. The moment you come back into the moment, it is as though you pop back onto the horse's radar. Or can be like tuning into a radio station: without that attunement to that radio station's frequency, you aren't in the moment (that thin band of frequency). The music, the broadcast, isn't heard by you or the horse; there's just static. That magic moment of attunement with a horse that so many talk about is all about being in the same moment with the horse, and the horse with you.

In an Equine Experiential Learning session, you work with and around a horse or horses, horse handlers, and a trained facilitator or coach. At the Discovery Horse workshop, we six participants and Sherman sat in a circle in the middle of the indoor arena. The three horses were led out by handlers to meet us. The horses, Leo, Titan, and Blue, freely nuzzled those of us they chose to check out, while under supervision of a handler, in case the horse became intrusive, and

the person became uncomfortable. Safety for all involved is the first priority, and that includes the safety of the horses. We discussed what we came to work on, and what each of us hoped to get out of the workshop. The day was a balance of talking/discussing and active interaction with the horses.

Sherman introduced us to the ways in which horse respond and give us feedback: moving away, holding still, lowering a head, lip licking and chewing, etc. If someone was not present or resistant to what was being discussed during a hands-on exercise, the horse would move away, usually just a step, and then move back into contact when the person become honest, authentic, and in the moment. One horse, Leo, started to get a little frisky, so he was put in the round pen (still with/around us, just in a place where he could be safely frisky). During an exercise, one woman approached him, placed her hands on him, and Leo immediately calmed in response to her energy and to the way she was present.

I witnessed amazing transformations: One woman initially expressed that she had become frightened of horses after an accident, even her own horse, and that she wanted to release that fear and other fears. After gently interactions with the horses, as simple as standing with our hands on a horse we were attracted to work with, being with the horse, or grooming and being present with a horse, we moved to more interactive exercises designed to help build trust: between us and the horse, between each other, and with ourselves. Sherman asked the woman, “Joan,” who had become frightened of horses, if she would be willing to participate in being led while sitting on one of the horses, Titan. “Joan” was to be blindfolded.

All exercises are “challenge by choice.” “Joan” agreed to the exercise. She was invited to choose two other participants to act as side-walkers; I was one of them. So we two side-walkers provided support, as a handler walked “Joan” and Titan around the arena and through and around various obstacles courses (walking over posts lying on the ground, in a tight circle around a traffic cone, and in a snaking pattern through multiple cones).

Each set of obstacles represented areas of challenge, areas of stuckness in “Joan’s” life, with Sherman talking and asking questions throughout each. Going round and round a traffic cone in tight little circles, Sherman asks “Joan,” “Is this familiar in your life? This process of going blindly in circles, feeling stuck?”

“Joan”: “Yeah.”

Sherman: “How does that feel?”

“Joan”: “Like it will never end.”

Sherman: “What would it take to do this differently? How would it feel to stop spinning out of control or feeling stuck?”

“Joan”: “It would feel good.”

During the course of this exercise, I noticed “Joan” began to become more involved with Titan, urging him on with a hand pushing on his withers, and using her legs more. At the end of the exercise, when she took off the blindfold to talk and assess, she seemed more open and confident. She had a radiant, happy glow in her face. She sat straighter, not curled-in and protective, as she had first seemed. Her eye contact was more direct, and her eyes were clear,

not clouded in pain or anxiety. She seemed genuinely happy to have participated in the exercise.

In another exercise, we participants were asked to get Titan to walk over a knee-height jump, without talking or using our hands to get him to move. We were told those were the only rules (no talking and no hands), and were asked to determine “consequences” for breaking the rules among ourselves. Some wanted no consequences, or that we should rewrite the “rules.” Others thought that benign “consequences” would be appropriate: forking up the manure (rather than the handlers doing it). The group finally decided that picking up the manure was the consequence we wanted. This was an optional punishment part of the exercise, and Sherman commented on our need to self-punish (in my opinion, an unfortunate cultural perspective). Immediately, being one of the more experienced horse people there [*Note: Horse experience is not necessary to participate in EEL.*], I moved into “horse-moving-mode” and talked and touched Titan on his side. My mind had completely blanked out the “rules”! Isn’t it remarkable how quickly the mind just slips us right into by-rote, automatic behavior. And when called on my infraction, I broke the “rules” again by speaking: “I forgot!” How quickly the mind checks us out of any given situation. As a group, we had no success in moving Titan even a step closer to the jump (about 30-feet away). Sherman reminded us that we still had one minute of planning time available.

I wondered if there was any “rule” saying that we couldn’t take the jump to Titan, rather than getting him to move. The goal was to get him to go over it without touching him or talking to him or others. We decided to move the jump. We set it within inches of his front legs. He nosed at it, and bent his head down over it as though he were getting ready to walk over it. Right then, the younger horse, Blue, gave Titan a smart nip on the back of his thigh, and Titan walked right over the jump. I experienced Blue as a very playful, happy horse, youthful and exuberant—I felt exuberant and playful whenever I was near him. In this exercise, I feel that Blue had picked up on our intentions and “played” into the action, by “encouraging” Titan to get a move on. I want to note that these two horses were at liberty in the arena the whole time during this exercise: they *chose* to participate. Nobody said, “Blue, come’ ere. We want you to help with this.” Blue voluntarily, appropriately, and playfully got involved in the action of the exercise. We weren’t even thinking about Blue; we were focused on Titan. We were in the moment, present to the challenge of this exercise, and the horses “tuned-in” and participated as partners with us, with a common goal. We were attuned to each other. I guess Blue broke the touching “rule,” but I didn’t see him picking up any manure, either.

The key to this work is congruency: being attuned, aligned with the moment, mind, body and spirit. “The horses are actually attracted to our congruency,” says Sherman, which invites them into partnership with humans. A horse “provides powerful feedback to help the person pinpoint what they need to work on,” says Sherman.

Like that excellent book, this Equine Experiential Learning experience has stayed with me over the intervening weeks. I continue to experience revelations and breakthroughs. I am acting differently in areas where I had been stuck. I wouldn’t be writing this article if I hadn’t experience this workshop, I’d still be stuck in not-writing. There’s a new openness and flow, and I am aware of being in the moment much more often. My horses have noticed the difference, too. All of these benefits coming from a few concentrated, focused hours of being in

the moment with some willing equine partners and a skilled coach. If you want to experience positive growth and change in your life, release areas of stuckness in your life, and experience life in a whole new way, I encourage you to explore the world of the horse through Equine Experiential Learning.

Resources: Melisa Pearce, Touched By A Horse, www.touchedbyahorse.com

Sara Sherman, Discovery Horse, www.discoveryhorse.com

Spirit Horse Center, www.spirithorsecenterinc.com

To find practitioners in your area, please Google "Equine Experiential Learning."

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